



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A commemoration of the 1855 fire

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Image: Fire hose nozzle. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

November 17 marked the 160th anniversary of one of the worst fires, in terms of loss of life, in Alexandria's history.

Started by arson in the Dowell China Shop, a three-story china and glass warehouse and shop on the 100 block of King St., the fire brought out the Star and Friendship fire companies as well as other members of the community to try and contain it. Together, they managed to bring the flames under control.

However, approximately five hours after the blaze started, the west wall of the warehouse fell and destroyed the first and second floors, killing seven firefighters. At least one account attributes the collapse of the wall to the storage of dynamite in the basement.

The partial collapse of the wall made the structure even more unstable, and those trapped inside could not be removed until the remaining portion of the wall was pulled down on top of them by those lucky enough to escape. The last of the deceased were not removed until approximately 11 hours after the first alarm was raised.

This picture shows a nozzle or hose pipe that was used by one of the firemen when the gable fell. It now has the names of the seven firefighters that lost their lives that night engraved on it: David Appich, James Keene, William Evans, George Plain, Carson Green, John Roach and Robert Taylor.

Six were from Star Company, which turned into the Columbia Fire Company, and one was from Friendship Company, which occupied the building where the Friendship Firehouse Museum now sits. Evans, Plain, Keene and Taylor were buried on November 19, 1855 after a procession passed through the streets of Alexandria and stopped at each of the firefighters' homes. One account claims that more than 1,000 people crossed the Potomac River to Alexandria for the funeral procession, and that the services and procession had between 4,000 and 5,000 mourners.

The grateful citizens of Alexandria in 1856 dedicated an obelisk memorial to the seven firefighters who lost their lives. It stands in the Ivy Hill Cemetery right inside the entrance of what was a new cemetery at the time. It is next to a granite fountain that was rededicated in 2001 to honor fire and EMS personnel who lost their lives in the line of duty, especially those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001 in New York and at the Pentagon.



"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.